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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SINGAPORE 000201

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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MTS - M. COPPOLA
NEW DELHI FOR J. EHRENDREICH

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SUBJECT: SINGAPORE PEOPLE'S PARTY MIRED IN DISTRUST,
DISSENSION

REF: SINGAPORE 164

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel Shields, Reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary. The Singapore People's Party (SPP) is demoralized even though it is one of only two opposition parties with a seat in Parliament, party contacts told PolOff recently. The SPP's attempt to forge a lasting partnership with the National Solidarity Party (NSP) failed in 2007 when the NSP pulled out of the Singapore Democratic Alliance umbrella group. SPP chief Chiam See Tong, despite having suffered a stroke in 2008, says he will contest a new and larger constituency in the next election, designating someone else to run in the small constituency he has held since 1984. The SPP's second- and third-ranking executives fault Chiam's leadership and electoral strategy but are unwilling or unable to defy his decisions. Assistant Secretary-General Desmond Lim said political progress in Singapore must await the departure from politics of both Chiam and Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. End summary.

12. (C) Comment. The SPP illustrates a pattern common to Singapore's fractious opposition: operating with few resources, the party suffers from ineffective leadership that keeps it relegated to the political margins. Chiam See Tong has alienated his own cohort to such a degree that the most influential of them are simply waiting for him to die or retire. There appears to be no succession plan even though Chiam is old and sick, and Chiam has only confused matters by bringing his wife into the party's executive body rather than delegating authority to potentially talented younger colleagues like Lim. With opposition like this, the People's Action Party (PAP) need hardly exert itself to maintain its grip on power. Absent unanticipated change, it appears the SPP can make significant gains in Singapore's next general election only if an economically-motivated anti-PAP backlash materializes. End comment.

SPP's Place in Singapore Opposition Politics

13. (U) The Singapore People's Party (SPP) holds one of Singapore's 84 elected seats in Parliament, making it one of only two opposition parties currently represented in the legislature. (Note: The other is the Workers Party, which has one elected seat and one "non-constituency" member appointed by law from among the unsuccessful opposition candidates at the last election. End note.) The SPP was born in 1994, when a faction led by Chiam See Tong and Sin Kek Tong split from the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) after Chiam lost a rancorous leadership struggle with his protege, Chee Soon Juan. Chiam has represented the small Potong Pasir constituency (which contained fewer than 16,000 voters in the 2006 general election) continuously since 1984.

The SDA: A Failed Experiment in Opposition Unity

¶4. (C) The SPP and the National Solidarity Party (NSP) formed the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) in 2001 in an attempt to unite several opposition parties under a single banner for electoral purposes. After failing to win any electoral constituencies for its own candidates in the 2001 or 2006 polls, the NSP exited the SDA in 2007. Its departure left only two tiny, electorally insignificant parties under the SDA umbrella with the SPP. NSP Secretary General Ken Sun and former NSP MP Steven Chia told PolOff recently that they took the NSP out of SDA because of Chiam's "failure to lead" the alliance.

Discontent and Disarray in Chiam's Fiefdom

¶5. (C) Chiam See Tong has been the SPP's only elected MP in its 14 years of existence. In recent separate conversations with PolOff, SPP Chairman and co-founder Sin Kek Tong and Assistant Secretary-General Desmond Lim both expressed frustration at the party's inertia and placed the blame squarely on Chiam. Sin said Chiam is uninterested in party-building and has failed to use his public standing to help the party grow. Lim went further, saying that the SPP leadership struggle with Chee Soon Juan left Chiam distrustful of everyone; unwilling to lead party-building efforts himself, he will not allow others to do so either, fearing a challenge to his authority. Both contacts described Chiam as autocratic and unwilling to accept criticism of his decisions. At a recent public forum, Sin told the audience disapprovingly that Chiam was "not likely"

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to support greater SPP cooperation with other opposition parties.

¶6. (C) Both Sin and Lim described a party at odds with itself, with a Central Executive Committee dominated by Chiam but unable to reach consensus on a strategy for the next general election. Singapore is currently divided into 14 Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and 9 Single Member Constituencies (SMCs). Each GRC requires a party to field a slate of 5 or 6 candidates, posing a manpower challenge to Singapore's small opposition parties. Chiam has publicly announced his intention to lead a GRC slate in the next election instead of standing for an eighth time in the Potong Pasir SMC. Chiam has not, however, said which GRC he will contest or identified his co-candidates. (Note: Chiam recently told the local press that he does not believe the GOS will call an election in 2009, a possibility that has been the subject of much speculation in local media and coffee shops - see reftel. End note.) Sin Kek Tong told PolOff that the SPP should not waste resources contesting GRCs but should place its best candidates in SMCs. Desmond Lim took no position on the SPP's election strategy; instead, he told PolOff resignedly that the party will make no gains at the next election because of its failure to grow its base.

Ailing Chiam Looks to His Wife, Not His Colleagues

¶7. (C) Chiam, who turns 74 this month, suffered a mild stroke last year. According to Sin Kek Tong, Chiam's stroke prevented him from performing many of his parliamentary and municipal duties during 2008. (Note: PolOff observed that Chiam appeared listless and inattentive during a February 2009 sitting of the legislature. End note.) Because of his uncertain health and distrust of his party colleagues, Chiam relies increasingly on his wife's assistance, Lim said. Mrs. Chiam recently rejoined the SPP's Central Executive Committee after an absence of several years, and Lim told PolOff that Chiam was thinking of having his wife replace him as a candidate in the Potong Pasir SMC. In a press interview published February 28, Chiam answered an inquiry on this point by saying, "She's acting like an MP already."

18. (C) SPP Assistant Secretary-General Desmond Lim told PolOff that he is in a double "waiting game": all of Singapore is waiting for Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew to pass from the scene, and the SPP is waiting for Chiam See Tong to do the same. Lim said that only after Lee Kuan Yew is gone will Singapore politics emerge from its "culture of fear" and opposition parties be able to achieve political maturity. Lim described himself as having a successful managerial career with telecoms company MobileOne Ltd., in which the GOS-linked Singapore Press Holdings owns a 13.97 percent stake. He cited this fact as proof that an opposition politician can lead a normal life in Singapore provided he does not embroil himself in personal disputes with members of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). Lim added that his cordial relations with many PAP officials have caused opposition colleagues to doubt his loyalty.

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